Art ConText

The RISD Museum
Exhibition Notes, Number 14, Spring 2001

Indira Freitas Johnson, *"Renewal" from Process of Karma,* 1995.
Photograph courtesy of the artist.

FREE NOT FREE an installation by Indira Freitas Johnson

June 22 through September 9, 2001

What Is Really Free? Acts of kindness and the stories people tell: an Interview.

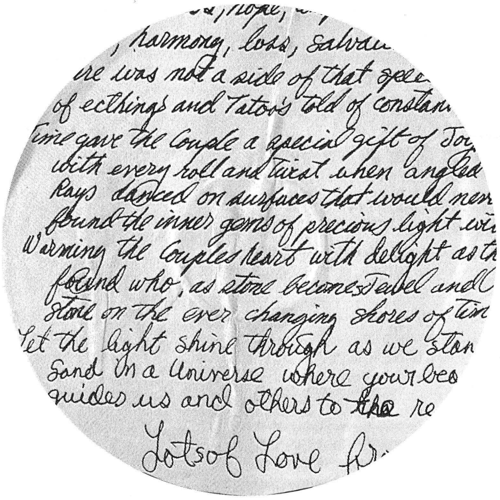
Between February and June of this year, Indira Freitas Johnson traveled each week from the Chicago area to work with a literacy group at the Knight Memorial Branch of the Providence Public Library. Starting with these students, recent immigrants learning English, Johnson began to collect stories of occasions where people had given "freely" of their time and spirit for the nourishment of others. With the assistance of five graduate students from Rhode Island School of Design, Johnson expanded her collection to include personal stories from throughout the community. David Henry, Head of Education at The RISD Museum, posed the following questions to Johnson in late spring.

Tell us something about yourself.

I grew up in Mumbai [Bombay], India, the second daughter in a family of six girls. My father was an artist and my mom was a social worker, and that combination of art and activism was part of my life from an early age. After undergraduate study in India, I came to the Art Institute of Chicago, where I received my MFA and met my future husband, Karl. Our early life together was as nomads living in India, Sweden, later Denver, and finally in Evanston, just north of Chicago, where we settled.

It seems that growing up in India has strongly influenced your art.

I am inspired by folk-art practices that are transitory, ritualistic, participatory, and that reflect the identity and issues of the community. In trying to find a balance between the culture and philosophy of India and the here and now of my life in the U.S., I have negotiated a path between tradition and the evolution of that tradition with contemporary experience. For example, the very first project that I worked on involved leprosy health education. It combined the Gandhian philosophy that I grew up with and the techniques employed by the advertising industry to disseminate information on a large scale. A group of tribal children who had been affected by leprosy and I painted images and text on a commuter train that ran between Mumbai and its far suburbs and spread the message of the curability of leprosy to thousands



Indira Freitas Johnson, *FREENOTFREE* (three details of *toran*), 2001. Images courtesy of the artist.

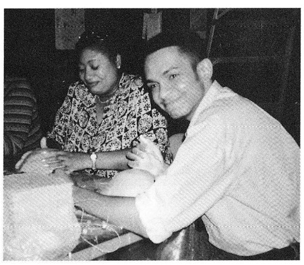
of people. In Chicago, I was involved in a project with a South Asian domestic-violence shelter. The installation used words, objects, and floor drawings to demonstrate the South Asian cultural dimension of domestic violence. In addition, I am the Founding Director of Shanti: Foundation for Peace, which uses the processes of art to help people understand that their individual actions can make a difference in the world. For the last five years we have been teaching nonviolent decision-making skills to children in the Evanston and Chicago public schools.

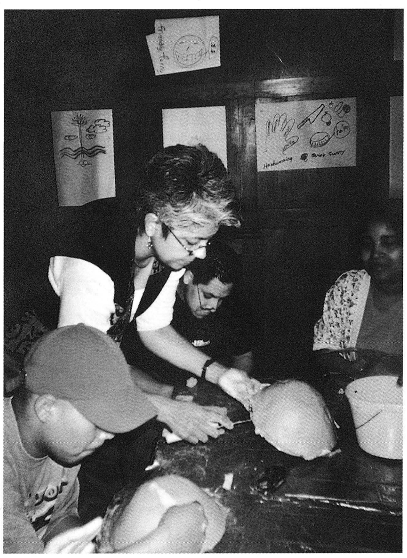
You still return to India and involve yourself in projects with people there. Would you share some of these experiences?

It is a spiritual experience to go back every year to the Golibar slum of Mumbai, where my family has worked for over thirty years. My sister Pushpika Freitas is the Founding Director of Marketplace: Handwork of India, whose mission is to provide employment opportunities in India for women and persons with handicaps. Economic accomplishments have led to increased self-esteem for the participating women and increased appreciation of them within their families and communities. My role is to design the fabric and clothing produced by the group and to provide workshops to encourage the participating women to create designs themselves. Because of our long involvement in this community, we have now become a part of each other's extended families.

Tell us a bit about the concept behind FREENOTFREE.

In our market-driven society we are constantly bombarded with "free offers," but we know nothing is truly free and that these "free offers" are usually trying to sell us something. We determine worth by how much something costs, so how do we value the countless acts of love, kindness, and support that are freely given and freely taken? That is the question that *FREENOTFREE* asks. The project honors people whose actions were integral to our physical and spiritual sustenance. The stories that the community has shared with me involve actions of comfort, tradition, and care-giving. They document the very personal emotional and physical aspects of this so-called "free" labor that operates outside the boundaries of a market society. At its core, *FREENOTFREE* is a community celebration that brings together the spiritual and material dimensions of life and reinforces the idea that each of us exists within a vast web of interrelationships.

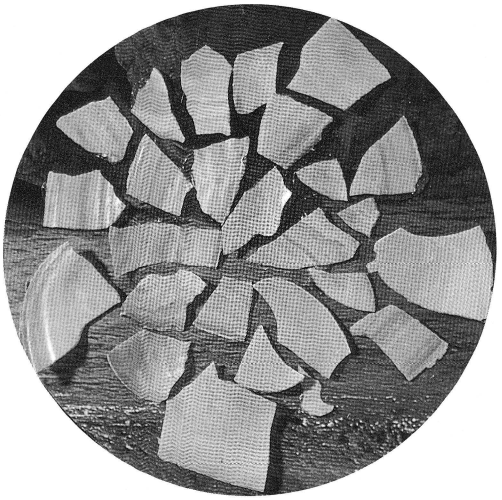




Johnson making bowls with literacy students at Knight Memorial Branch, Providence Public Library. Photographs by Stephen Oliver.

How have your ideas about the project changed since you arrived in Providence in February?

The project has not changed so much as it has grown. This idea of the "free" work that we do for each other has been germinating in my imagination for a number of years. I have always wanted to explore a wide range of stories that reflect the rich diversity of such experiences within a community. As I became intensely involved with the literacy students at the library, I realized that I would need to gather stories from the larger community. A relatively shy person, I was filled with doubt about just going out and talking to people. I have been amazed at the way people who don't know me at all have generously shared their experiences with me. Some were passionate in their recounting of extraordinary acts of comfort and care. Others became emotional as they recalled the many small but daily actions that added up to a vast accumulation of love. These stories honor teachers, mothers, aunts, fathers, and



sometimes strangers whose actions have sustained and transformed the tellers in their life journeys.

Two of the central elements of the exhibition – the hanging and the floor pattern – are based on Indian women's folk-art traditions. Would you describe them and why they are of interest to you artistically?

Both the making of the *rangoli* [floor pattern] and the *toran* [door hanging] have their origin in the need to locate the individual within a larger universe. Handed down through time from woman to girl, these traditions are embedded in a ritual practice centered around the protection and well-being of one's family. I particularly like the ephemeral nature of the *rangoli*, in which a woman inaugurates the day by painting a pattern on the threshold of her home. In the course of the day, the *rangoli* is gradually erased as friends and family walk over it, and the ritual is repeated once more the next morning. The traditional *toran* is an embroidered door hanging meant to welcome friends and deities into the sacred space that is the home.

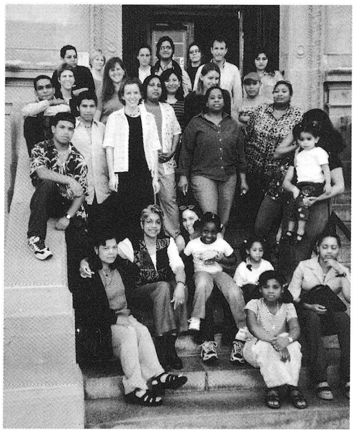
Hybridized versions of these traditional forms appear in many of my installations, as their concepts of sacred space, the transitory nature of all life, and the honoring of community coincide with my creative vision. Of additional relevance is the fact that they are labor intensive, recalling parallel rituals performed the world over: daily chores involved with gathering, preparing, and nurturing.

Do the materials you chose and the forms you used have specific symbolic meanings?

In India, the metaphysical and spiritual come together in ritual expression as a means to discover and interpret the meaning of life. The forms in the floor piece are basic geometric shapes – circles, squares, and triangles – that are symbols of different energies in the universe. Ritual can transform materials or objects and make them function spiritually as well as physically. By presenting common natural materials in a ritualistic format, I hope to engage the viewer in the idea of the sacredness of everyday life. The materials I select are simple, function on multiple levels, and go to the core of the feeling I want to create. For example, in one area of the floor diagram I wanted to use water, a substance that we usually take for granted. I wanted to show it as this vital and precious resource. After exploring a number of different options from beautiful colored clamshells to smooth weathered pebbles found on Providence beaches, we decided to use water contained in a plastic baggie so that it looks like this exquisite gift shimmering with life.

Why did you choose to work with a literacy group at the library?

I have been involved in arts-based community work for over a decade. Previous communities that I have worked in all have had some common theme or issue that has brought them together. Here, I decided to work with a group that primarily shares a common humanity rather than a particular issue or ethnicity. The library exemplifies my concept of the "free" work that we do to nourish and support each other. The gift of literacy that the library offers is "free" in that it does not cost the recipient money; yet it requires many resources, including the energy, time, and talents of Program Leader Sacia Stiles and all the volunteers. Moreover, not having grown up with a public library system, it is one of the so-called "free" resources that I cherish.



What are some of the specific things you did with the literacy group?

Sacia, the volunteers, the RISD students, and I were able to take the abstract concept of the *FREENOTFREE* project and break it up into simple lesson plans for the literacy students. They were eager learners, and it was an enjoyable process to help them write their stories about the people who had made a difference in their lives. Later they made ceramic bowls that became spiritual containers to honor these people. Many had never used clay before, so it was a scary yet wonderful experience. Their enthusiasm and hunger to be involved demonstrated how few opportunities there are for people to engage in art. It was obvious that many of them possessed vast untapped creative talent. A portable *raku* kiln traveled to the library, thanks to Larry Bush and the RISD Ceramics Department, who amazed the whole neighborhood with their skills and dramatic firing techniques.

The project continued moving outwards. "Free" cloth bags containing objects of beauty and mystery from nature – seeds, rose petals, stones, shells, leaves – were distributed

Literacy class, teachers, and volunteers in front of the Knight Memorial Branch, Providence Public Library. Photograph by Stephen Oliver.

in exchange for stories. Gift boxes were placed in all the library branches and The RISD Museum, giving passers-by a chance to become involved in this "free" exchange.

At Miss Fannie's Soul Food Kitchen, Cheryl Spears most graciously allowed me to interview her clients while indulging in some of the best soul food I've ever tasted. Seniors from Progresso Latino and the Lillian Feinstein Senior Center shared stories that were passionate and compelling. Some dated to as far back as the Second World War. I had some delightful times with the Unified Sistas group at the John Hope Settlement House and with women from Dorcas Place, talking, discussing, and exchanging stories about people whose actions benefited their lives. The Library staff encouraged patrons to participate in the project by holding special evening gatherings for this purpose.

Working with the RISD students was especially rewarding. A collaborative art process is always uncomfortable at the beginning, as we go back and forth between the known and the unknown; but they hung in there and were enthusiastic and supportive as we brainstormed ideas for materials for the installation and for lesson plans. They participated in all phases of the project. The "web master" at the heart of all the connections between individuals, community, ideas, materials, and more was Art ConText Program Coordinator Stephen Oliver. Plans were made and ideas and concepts realized in our long end-of-the-day brainstorming sessions. I was surprised at how easy it was to connect with people over this issue, and it reaffirmed my belief in the essential goodness and deeply rooted nurturing aspects of human nature. The stories for the wall were selected to reflect the depth of the community experience demonstrated by the entire collection of stories.

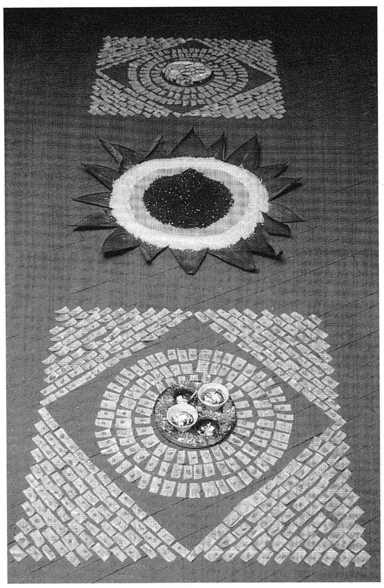
RISD students participating in the *FREENOTFREE* project: (l. to r.) Laura Becker (M.Art Ed. '02), artist Indira Freitas Johnson, Matthew Richards (MFA Sculpture '02), Natasa Jelic (M.Interior Architecture '03), Leonor DeLope Friedeberg (M.Interior Architecture '03), Mayura Dhume (M.Interior Architecture '03). Photograph by Stephen Oliver.

Each of the Art ConText artists has had to find a balance between their own artistic vision and giving voice to those in the community with whom they worked. Would you share your thinking on this?

What I enjoy most about community work is the challenge inherent in the process. You bring together a group of individuals, who are more or less strangers, and help them discover through dialogue, art, and ritual the commonality of our human experience and the spiritual potential inherent in all of us. Over the course of this process numerous questions arise about power-sharing, whether one is a teacher or a learner or both, and what the chosen community gains from the collaborative process. The answers are a process of negotiation. My role became clear as the project unfolded: to take the individual community voices and link them together in a way that connects them to the greater whole – family, community, cosmos.

What were the hardest and most rewarding parts of your residency?

When I first agreed to become an Art ConText artist, I blithely said that I would commute weekly between Chicago and Providence. Things are never as simple as they seem. Traveling has brought both challenges and unexpected opportunities, so that the journey itself became part of the project. I photographed the endlessly magical cloud formations from the airplane window and used them in the installation. The interactions with a variety of people from cab drivers to fellow travelers developed into exchanges. They told me stories, and I listened and honored their experiences. The totality of the Art ConText residency was truly priceless. It reinforced my belief in the myriad bonds that exist between each of us and in the interconnectedness of all life.



Indira Freitas Johnson, *"Woman's Worth" from Voices of Shakti*, 1996. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

A ceramist by training, Johnson was born in Bombay, India, in 1943 and currently resides in Evanston, Illinois. She received undergraduate degrees from Sir J. J. Institute of Applied Art and the University of Bombay and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1997, she was awarded the Governor's Award for the Arts (Illinois) and in 1993 an Arts International Traveling Fellowship from the Illinois Art Council. She has previously undertaken residencies at the Anderson Ranch in Snowmass, Colorado; the Kohler Factory in Sheboygan, Wisconsin; the Golibar slum in Bombay, India; and SEWA Milthila in Bihar, India.

Design: Malcolm Grear Designers

The RISD Museum

FREENOTFREE is the eighth Art ConText project. Art ConText, a partnership between the Providence Public Library and The RISD Museum, is designed to introduce new audiences to contemporary art; to bring art and reading programs to library branches throughout Providence; and to provide opportunities for RISD students to apply their talents. Funding for Art ConText is provided by Pew Charitable Trusts and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more information about Art ConText, visit the web site at www.risd.edu/artcontext.

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The RISD Museum / Providence Public Library